

BAGELS - THE WHOLE TRUTH

Bernice Hurst (1984)

Growing up in New York was the perfect introduction to foods of all kinds. You didn't have to be Jewish to love Levy's and you didn't have to seek out ethnic shops - they were on every street corner. Supermarkets catered for each and every group, so everyone had the opportunity of seeing what their neighbours ate.

All this changed for me when I settled in England. And not just in England, but deep in the English countryside where little market towns and villages were excellent sources of local produce, but barren of almost anything exotic. When I tried to find bagels I found that they were not only not available, but no one knew what I was looking for. Outside of the cities where there are Jewish populations, no one had ever heard of the things. So like any good immigrant, I set out to find a recipe to make my own. Easier said than done and although the following recipe is one which I now use because it produces bagels the way my own family likes them, it may not produce every one else's favourite bagel.

For those who are unfamiliar with bagels, they are round, slightly sweet bread rolls with a hole in the middle. They are very chewy, with a dense crumb and close texture. They can be eaten hot or cold and should be sliced through the middle. The most well known bagel topping is cream cheese and smoked salmon (lox) but in fact they can be used for any kind of open or closed sandwich or simply buttered as an accompaniment.

There are as many different bagels as there are bakers. The story goes - and it is almost totally unsubstantiated, albeit plausible - that bagels were first invented in Vienna. They were called Beugels, a variation on the German word for stirrup, *bugel*. The name and shape were allegedly created in honour of the King of Poland, who had saved Austria from Turkish invaders, and were made in the shape of rings intended to resemble his stirrups, to which the peasants had clung in gratitude. This story first appeared in the *Saturday Review* in 1964 and triggered a correspondence which continued in that magazine for several months.

But whenever, and however, they were invented, bagels were part of the Jewish cuisine from that day forwards. Bagels, hardboiled eggs and schmalz herring - hard and bitter foods which commemorate the destruction of the Temple - are traditionally eaten immediately after a funeral by the family in mourning. They have also been said to represent the continuous, unending (i.e. round) cycle of life and the world, so are frequently mentioned as symbols of luck in relation to childbirth. My own children used bagels as teething rings - they are very strong and impervious to infant gums.

In fact, I have not been able to learn why bagels are so singularly Jewish, but in towns and cities where there are no Jewish bakers, there are no bagels. Leeds, Manchester and possibly Glasgow have audiences for their bagels (called baigels in the north of England) but further south they are rarities. America's largest bagel baker, Lender's of Connecticut, have frozen and packaged the bagel and claim to be the country's largest supplier. They have introduced the bagel to the whole of the United States and even export to the UK. In America, and particularly New York, nearly everyone knows about bagels. Leo Rosten, in *The Joys of Yiddish*, mentions an advertisement run by Macy's on St Patrick's Day in 1968:

BAGELS
BEGORRAH!
(GREEN ONES, YET)

The ad ended with a reminder that cream cheese and lox were being sold on the eighth floor. Lilian Mermin Feinsilver in *The Taste of Yiddish* tells of another New York department store that sells Safety Bagel Holders with the slogan, 'Dont Cut the Hand that Feeds You'. She also repeats the Jewish folktale which explains how the bagel is made - you start with a hole and put some dough around it. El Al produced a book of bagel jokes with an invitation for 'bagel scholars' to submit their own quips. The resulting letters provided enough material for a second volume. On a more serious note, one of America's most active unions was that of the bagel bakers. After a number of not wholly successful strikes to improve their working conditions, the union hit the front page of the *New York Times* in 1951: 'Bagel Famine Threatens in City. Labor

Dispute Puts Hole in Supply'. To end the crisis, a special mediator - who had once before settled a lox strike - was brought in.

Back in Great Britain, a bagel bakery which opened in the Edgeware Road in 1977 didn't last long, but the New York Bagel Factory in Kentish Town has been flourishing since July of last year with an ever-increasing number of outlets to its credit. So perhaps the trend is changing, at least in the Home Counties. In the depths of Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Dorset and Wiltshire they are still unheard of.

As for the recipes, there are certain basic rules on which everyone agrees. Bagels must be boiled before they are baked. This is essential. It is the boiling process which produces the crispy outside and chewy inside. More flour is used in bagels than in any other sort of bread or roll to produce the close texture. The bagels increase in size while they are boiling, so they do not have to rise or prove for as long as other breads. From here the experts diverge.

Boiling time for bagels is one of the most significant differences in the recipes I've found. Lorna Walker and Joyce Hughes, quoted in the *Time Life* book, *Breads*, advocate ten seconds only. Carlson Wade in David and Charles' *The Bread Book* emphasises that the bagels should boil for *exactly* seven minutes. Evelyn Rose, in *The Complete International Jewish Cookbook*, recommends two minutes and suggests that once the bagels float to the surface they should be flipped over. Lender's let their bagels float for one minute, then flip them and let them float for another minute.

As for the baking itself, most authorities agree that ungreased pans should be used, but others do not use greased pans. The New York Bagel Factory eliminates pans altogether, preferring to use the floor of the oven. Theories on turning also differ. Most people recommend five minutes on the exposed side to dry them off, then advise turning the bagels and baking until they are crisp and golden. But not all purists agree that this is necessary.

But the biggest difference of all comes in the flavouring ingredients. Basic bagels consist of flour, water, a pinch of salt and yeast. There are many people who deny the authenticity of any bagel which does not include an egg or egg yolks in the dough. Malt powder is often used as

well and there are some bakers who use milk instead of water and add butter or margarine.

Modern variations in flavourings include the use of rye and/or wholemeal flour in differing quantities to produce rye, wholemeal or pumpernickel bagels. Salt, onions, seeds - caraway, poppy and sesame - are often either added to the dough or sprinkled on top. Lender's boasts of cinnamon bagels, garlic bagels, raisin and honey bagels and bagelettes, and have produced a 200-plus-paged paperback book of suggested uses for their product. Sweets, savouries, salads, snacks, using whole bagels, chopped bagels, sliced bagels, bagel crumbs -- and I've heard a report of a Chicago Double-Twisted Bagel which tops the lot!

Herewith, then, the recipe most enjoyed in my own home. The bagels can be brushed with lightly beaten egg white, egg yolk, whole egg or water before baking and sprinkled with chopped onion, garlic, salt or any sort of seeds. The flour can be varied - substituting rye, wholewheat or even granary flour for part of the white flour will alter the flavour and texture and you may prefer it that way. But the basic recipe stands on its own and is enthusiastically endorsed by the Hurst clan so for those who have to, or want to, make their own bagels, *es gezunt heit* - eat in good health.

1 oz/25g fresh yeast OR 3teaspoons/3 x 5ml spoons dry yeast
12 oz/350ml warm water
2 tablespoons/2 x 15ml spoons sugar
1 1/2 lb/500g strong flour
1 tablespoon/15ml spoon salt
2 tablespoons/ 2 x 15ml spoons oil
1 egg OR 1 egg yolk (optional)

Combine the yeast, 1 teaspoon/5ml spoon sugar and 4 oz/125 ml water. Leave to reconstitute if you are using dry yeast. Combine the flour, salt and remaining sugar. Stir in the yeast mixture, the remaining water, oil and egg or yolk if you are using it. Mix well and knead until dough is firm. Leave to rise until it is double in bulk, punching down once after 30 minutes and then leaving it to finish rising.

To shape the bagels, cut the dough into 18 pieces. Roll each piece into a strip approximately half an inch/1.5cm thick. Seal the ends together to make a ring. Alternatively, shape the dough into 18 balls and poke a hole in each large enough to take two or three fingers. Place the bagels on a floured baking tray, cover and leave to rise for 15 minutes. Drop the bagels, just a few at a time to allow room for them to float, into a large pan of simmering water. When the bagels rise to the surface, flip them over. Let them simmer two to three minutes, then drain. Bake for twenty to twenty five minutes in an oven at gas 8, 450°F, 230°C, turning them over once after the first five minutes of baking time. They will be golden brown and very crispy when they are cooked. Slice in half and serve warm or reheat or toast if you are saving them for later. Bagels also freeze very well, so while you are making them, be sure to do a lot.